

Addressing the state of the healthcare in our country is one of the most important issues to the American people for a simple reason: our healthcare system is failing far too many Americans.

Tens of millions of our citizens have no insurance. Tens of millions more are underinsured. For them, all of the medical wonders our doctors have produced may as well not exist.

When they fall ill - or worse, when their children are hurt, or have a fever, or need care - where can they turn? Far, far too often, the answer is: nowhere.

We need a comprehensive solution to this problem. The citizens of this country expect, and deserve, nothing less. That is a challenge we must confront together, and it will take time.

Last month, your Congress made a real dent in one of the most galling and shameful inadequacies of our healthcare system: the lack of coverage for America's children.

Congress created the State Child Health Insurance Plan, or SCHIP, in 1997 with broad bipartisan support. As a result, six million children currently have health care coverage that otherwise would not. And right here in New York, nearly 400,000 children are enrolled, the second highest number in the nation.

There is a reason why President Bush pledged that he would fully fund SCHIP while he was on the campaign trail in 2004: it was because this program is enormously popular with the public, and because it has already proven to be enormously successful.

And yet, there is much more to be done. Nine million American children still remain without health insurance. 400,000 of them are in New York State alone. It is a situation that remains, quite simply, unconscionable.

SCHIP will cover five million new children - 11 million in total. That would be a truly historic change. Such a vast improvement is reason enough to support this legislation. But this bill does even more to better the health of Americans.

It will strengthen Medicare by expanding preventive benefits, as well as mental health services, reducing costs for seniors and people with disabilities who also have low incomes, and extending policies that protect access to health care in rural communities.

What is more, the bill will prevent a proposed 10 percent cut in Medicare reimbursements to physicians, replacing it with an increase for two years. This is especially important for districts throughout the country – and our district, where we are having trouble holding on to good doctors because of financial concerns that, until now, have not been addressed.

I am extremely proud of our accomplishments so far in this new Congress. Our constituents expect us to tackle the healthcare challenge before us. They demand it. And this bill is an important step for it will touch the lives of literally millions of our people.